THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

A WISE HEART KNOWS WHAT TIME IT IS

January 17, 1999
John M. Buchanan

"He is the light in which things are beheld. He is the light that falls upon things by which they are beheld. And he is the light of the beholding eye. He is the road and he is the goal, and he became the traveler. He is where I began, he is my journey, and my home at the last.

Joseph Sittler

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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January 17, 1999
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Psalm 90
Isaiah 49:1-7
John 1:29-42
"Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart."
Psalm 90:12

Dear God, You have given us life; the gift of time—decades, years, weeks, days, hours; a lot of time to become what we can, to do what we can. You ask us to honor that gift by receiving it gratefully and by using it responsibly. We have decided to use this hour to worship you; to join our voices, our hopes, our faith in your praise. Now speak to each of us the word you have for us today. Startle us with your truth, and silence in us any voice but your own. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

* * *

"All (people) complain that they haven't enough time. They look at their lives from too human a point of view. There is always time to do what God wants us to do, but we must put ourselves completely into each moment (God) offers us."

So begins a favorite prayer of mine. I have loved it over the years and kept it close at hand. It is by Michel Quoist, a French Catholic priest, "Lord, I Have Time."

"I went out Lord,
People were coming and going
Walking and running.
Everything was rushing: cars, trucks, the street, the whole town.
People were rushing not to waste time.
They were rushing after time,
To catch up with time,
to gain time.

"Good-bye, Sir, excuse me, I haven't time.
I'll come back. I can't wait, I haven't time.
I must end this letter, I haven't time.
I'd love to help you, but I haven't time.
I can't accept, having no time.
I can't think, I can't read, I'm swamped, I haven't time.
I'd like to pray, but I haven't time.

"Lord, you have made a big mistake in your calculations.
There is a big mistake somewhere.
The hours are too short,
The days are too short,
Our lives are too short." (*Prayers*, p. 96-99)

continued to p5 →

Time . . . Putting in time . . . Killing time . . . Wasting time.

"Your flight has been delayed." Are there any more ominous words than these? Of course there are, but the way we react when we hear them, you'd think they are the equivalent of a death sentence. As a matter of fact, a fair number of us heard those words recently as we tried to get out of or back to the world's busiest airport. One of the games city people play, in fact, it's one of our favorites, is "My travel disasters are worse than yours." In this game what happened to us last week won't even make it past the first round. We arrived at the San Diego Airport an hour before departure time, checked in, reported to the gate, and were told that there was a five-hour weather delay. You know what happens: your spirit sags, blood pressure rises, you quickly rehearse the people you need to call, the meetings you're going to miss, and you try to remember if you brought along a few books you've been meaning to read and whether there are enough in your briefcase to get you through five hours. Time—unplanned, unscheduled time; time wasted perhaps. Two hours later, we were told to board the plane—we were taking off immediately—our spirits soar. No more wasted time. In our seats, buckled up, carry-on luggage stowed, doors closed, engines revving up, we're feeling pretty good, and then the fateful throttle down, and the captain, "Sorry folks, they must shut down O'Hare. It will be at least an hour until we know anything. In the meantime, our crew is close to our federally-mandated time limit, so there's a real chance that we're not going at all." Now, we're/I'm increasingly anxious. Now, we're talking about a whole day, not just a few hours. Our alternatives are pretty limited. People are getting angry, cursing—the weather, the airline, starting to make demands of flight attendants.

One of the unread books in my briefcase was Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird.* She is a California writer, and a good one, a Presbyterian Christian who takes her faith and her church very seriously. She will be our guest on International Women's Day, March 1st. I opened to where I had left off, and it was as if I had received a direct word from God, a fax from heaven, as Jim Forbes calls it when he's scrounging around for sermon ideas.

Lamott's best friend in the world, Pammy, a single mom like herself, was dying of cancer. Lamott found herself deeply depressed and angry and sad, so she sought out Pammy's physician, who happened also to be a personal friend. He said, "Watch her carefully right now, because she is teaching you how to live." Lamott reflects:

> "I remind myself of this when I cannot get any work done: to live as if I'm dying, because the truth is we are all terminal on this bus. To live as if we are dying gives us a chance to experience some real presence. Time is so full for people who are dying in a conscious way, full in a way life is for children. They spend big, round hours. So, instead of staring miserably at the computer screen trying to will my way into having a breakthrough, I say to myself, "Okay, hmmm, let's see. Dying tomorrow. What should I do today?" (p. 179).

I thought about *Tuesdays with Morrie* and how Professor Morrie Schwartz, dying of ALS, taught his former student and writer, Mitch Albom, so much about life and living purposefully, intentionally, meaningfully—taught him, in their Tuesday morning conversations before he died, not that every moment has to be filled with frantic activity, but not to waste time as if it had no value. I thought about our own Glen, who also died consciously and who worked hard at seeing what he wanted to see, saying what he wanted

to say, experiencing trees and flowers and birds and water and music and poetry and the pursuit of religious understanding and faith to the very end.

I thought of something Abraham Maslow wrote once while recovering from a serious heart attack.

> "The confrontation with death—and the reprieve from it—makes everything so precious, so sacred, so beautiful, that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, to embrace it, and to let myself be overwhelmed by it. My river has never looked so beautiful. Death, and its ever present possibility makes love, passionate love, more possible. I wonder if we could love passionately, if ecstasy would be possible at all, if we knew we'd never die." (Rollow May, *Love and Will* , p. 99)

"So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart," the Psalmist wrote.

Wisdom is an important Biblical concept. There is a whole category of biblical writing called Wisdom Literature. The Book of Proverbs, for instance. The accumulated wisdom of history is respected in Israel. Rabbis are wise teachers. What you want from a rabbi is wisdom. But in the Bible, wisdom is different from our definition. Our culture might be inclined to equate wisdom with knowledge, facts, figures, formulas, equations, or perhaps with technical skill; certainly with financial success. When Bill Gates speaks, lots of people listen. When Michael Jordan speaks, the whole world listens. (An unrelated anecdote, but how can anyone preach in Chicago today without at least a brief lament for No. 23? My good friend, Barbara Wheeler, distinguished educator, President of Auburn Theological Seminary, called on Wednesday and said, "John, I know that pastors try to take care of everyone's needs and sometimes there is no one to take care of the pastor. I just want you to know that I feel your pain." "That's very kind of you, Barbara," I said, "but what in the world are you talking about?" "Well, she said," I'm a lifelong Knick's fan, and for the past ten years you have been positively insufferable. I know that you're in a lot of pain." I was and I am. And I'm afraid that we'd all better repent and start mending fences with Knicks', Jazz, and Laker fans and get ready for a long night of the soul.)

One of the best things about Michael Jordan, in addition to the impossible hang-time and the ballet-like fade away jump shot, was the fact that he did not equate his success as an athlete with expertise on foreign policy, school reform, and the quality of health care, even when the press wanted him to. And when he retired, he reminded everyone that basketball is a game played in a world where young, devoted police officers are killed and that, all things considered, when all was said and done, it was time to just do it. There it was, I thought, almost biblical in its wisdom. Biblical wisdom is knowing what time it is. Wisdom in the Bible is knowing the importance of time, respecting time, receiving the gift of time, using time intentionally, responsibly.

> "Count your days that you may get a wise heart."

"Teach us to number our days," the older translation puts it. When we do that, when we count our days, most of us conclude that they're getting away from us, slipping by too quickly. Most of us experience the law of accelerating time: we can remember when a summer vacation from school stretched out ahead like an eternity, almost an endless future of hot, sunny days, June, July and all of August, and subsequently, how quickly time flies

now, how years seem now to speed by as if they were months. Perhaps our most frequently expressed lament is that we don't have enough time.

There was an intriguing editorial in the *New York Times* around New Year's, by Richard Ford, "Our Moments have All Been Seized." "The now—our experience of the present moment—feels under attack," the author argued, "the ways in which the series of moments we describe collectively as our real lives is made insignificant, made ignoble or forgettable, made hellish, or made in essence non-existent by all sorts of outside forces . . . like those ubiquitous television sets in airport waiting areas broadcasting programs we don't want to see or hear: unconscionable numbers of message on our email, all demanding replies, phone calls at the dinner hour on the subject of platinum cards, magazine subscriptions, mutual funds we don't own and don't want."

In an ominous way, Ford wrote, these interruptions represent a turf battle for my soul and my time and what I'm going to be thinking about. Ford wants his "moments to be treated with care. Put simply, the pace of life feels morally dangerous to me. And what I wish for is not to stop or even to slow it, but to be able to experience my lived days as valuable days." (*New York Times*, 12/27/98).

"Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart."

Trapped in my seat on a delayed flight, I learned, again, that while I am never in ultimate control of my time, I am, in a sense, the only one who can be responsible for the use and content of the time given to me. You can rant and rave, get short of breath and all sweaty and worked up, yell at the flight attendant, wring your hands; or, you can simply relax and then ask yourself to what other use God would have you put this unexpected, unwanted, but potentially grace-filled, gift of time.

In the little reflection journal I read every morning, I came across the following excerpt from a book entitled, *A Life of One's Own*. Joann Fields writes:

> "One day I stopped in front of a Cezanne still life: green apples, a white plate, and a cloth. I was tired, restless, distracted. I simply sat and looked. Slowly, something was pulling me out of my vacant stare, and the colors were coming alive, gripping my gaze till I was soaking myself in their vitality. Gradually, a great delight filled me. It had all happened by just sitting still and waiting. If just looking could be so satisfying, why was I always striving to have things or to get things done?" (*A Life of One's Own*, in *Daybook* 9/21/98).

Martin Marty, who lives life about as intentionally and productively and joyfully as anyone I know, keeps on his study wall an inscription given to him by a Lutheran bishop a long time ago:

> "Life is short and we have not much time for gladdening the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind."

So part of the wisdom one gains by knowing what time it is, is to do what you want to do and say what you want to say. "Be swift to love." I read a poignant essay by a woman who was called home to the bedside of her critically ill mother who had slipped into unconsciousness and was dying; a mother with whom she had a lifetime of conflict and

unhappiness. "All I could think of to say," she wrote, "was the 'I love you' she always wanted me to say but which I refused to say." (*Weavings*, Jan/Feb 1999) I think we're doing better on this one, but we still have a way to go. We still have trouble, many of us do, telling the people we care about that we care about them; telling the people we love that we love them. I've said this before, will again, and it comes from the Bible, from Psalm 90—go home today and call your parents, or your children, or your dearest friend, or your beloved, and say it: "I love you."

Life is short—count your days—be swift to love.

The first words of Jesus, according to the Gospel of John, after he had been baptized by his cousin, were "What are you looking for?"

He asked the question of the two men who were following him, "What are you looking for?"

How would you and I answer if he asked that question of us, we who have followed him at some distance, interested in his words, fascinated by his example, seeking, coming to church somewhat tentatively, not sure we want to commit, risk, to get involved. "What are you looking for?"

One of the things we are looking for is some sense that the time we have is being meaningfully lived, "to experience my lived days as valuable days." We're looking for a sense that this period of time, circumscribed by our birth and our death, has and will have significance, matters and will matter in some way. We're looking for a little freedom from our bondage to time, from the restless sense that we don't have enough of it, that it is slipping through our fingers and therefore that we have to grasp it tightly, squeeze it frantically, never risk it.

His cousin, John, called him "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," and we could spend the rest of our lives plumbing the meaning and depth of that "sin of the world which he takes away." But part of the sin, I think, from which you and I need to be delivered is our bondage to time, our oppression to time. Part of what you and I desperately need to be saved <u>for</u> is the intentional, responsible use of the gift of time God has given us.

He, after all, did not have very much of time in terms of quantity, far less than most of us. His cousin, John, who recognized him as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," had even less time left. And so, part of what we might say, when he asks us what it is we are looking for, is to live our lives in imitation of him, to "experience our lived days as significant days," as he did, to live with integrity, with the courage of our convictions, with passionate love for the world, for our communities, for our families, for those precious ones God has given us to love, to live with vulnerability, and the strength to move ahead even in the face of doubt, and most of all, with a sharpened sense of time, a wise sense of what time it is.

Michel Quoist concludes the prayer I love so much:

> "Lord, I have time,
> I have plenty of time,
> All the time that you give me.

over →

The years of my life,
The days of my years,
The hours of my days,
They are all mine.
Mine to fill, quietly, calmly,
But to fill completely, up to the brim,
To offer them to you, that of their insipid water
You may make a rich wine such
as you once made in Cana of Galilee.
I am not asking you tonight, Lord, for time to do this and then that,
But your grace to do conscientiously, in the time
that you have given me, what you want me to do."

~~Number your days that you may gain a heart full of wisdom.~~

Amen.

So, count your days ..
gain a heart of wisdom
and, have the time of
your life.

Amen